

# BLACK GIRL POWER

## RICE & BEANS, RHYTHM & BEATS

BY IBI ZOBOI

The Clover Middle School cafeteria during fifth period lunch was the *worst* place on earth. At least that's what Beatrice believed before she met three of her *best* friends in the whole wide world.

After Mr. Rossi's fourth period science class (her absolute favorite), and before Ms. Harris's sixth period music class (her absolute least favorite), Beatrice Jean-Baptiste braced herself for what felt like Carnival back home in Haiti, except without the drumbeat rhythms of her father's tanbou. Once the bell rang and Mr. Rossi opened the door, the hallway leading to the cafeteria was a street parade, but instead of

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music, loud laughing, yelling, and screaming filled the air in the school building.

The kids walking to the East wing for their next class and the kids walking to the West wing toward the cafeteria made the ground feel like it was splitting in half. The stomping feet, the squeaking sneakers, the thunderous voices, the shouting, the pushing, and shoving were all a celebration for a little bit of freedom away from math problems, boring books, and hard tests. This was when she missed home the most—the sounds of her father’s band playing sweet music for Carnival goers, or when he would beat the drum just so he could watch Beatrice dance.

So Beatrice could not wait for music class, nor could she wait to eat her favorite foods from home for lunch. On her way to the cafeteria, Beatrice would clutch her book bag against her chest and walk along the edges of the hall, against the wall and lockers, until she reached the double-doors where it was even louder. Principal Parson’s bullhorn and mousy voice were not enough to keep everyone in check. The lunch trays holding square pizzas and soggy broccoli weren’t much help either as some of the kids tossed them into the trash bin before they even got to their seats. Rows of tables and benches were like a maze that Beatrice had to navigate in order to get to the quiet corner way on the other side of the

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cafeteria. But first, she had to pass the lunch ladies behind the counter and salad bar.

“Come here sweetie!” Ms. Gloria would call out as she passed by. “Come get you a tray. It’s pizza Tuesday!”

Beatrice returned a gentle smile while politely shaking her head. For weeks she’d been avoiding the lunch ladies and heading to the empty table to sit by herself without a tray and without eating. She slid all the way to the end of the bench and never pulled out her lunch bag which wasn’t really a lunch bag, but a plastic bag from her local supermarket with its handles tied so tight, she had to use her teeth to pull it loose. In the bag was a margarine container which didn’t actually have margarine but last night’s rice and beans with stew chicken. Beatrice’s stomach growled, but she dared not pull out the lunch that her sweet grandmother had prepared.

On the first day of middle school, Beatrice was so brand new and so hungry that she didn’t even think twice about sitting wherever she pleased and pulling out her margarine container filled with her grandmother’s delicious black rice and stewed greens. But as soon as she took her first bite, the boy sitting across from her pinched his nose, the girl next to him made gagging sounds, and the other girl sitting next to Beatrice quickly scooted away.

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“Ewww! What is *that?*” she squealed, pointing to Beatrice’s lunch.

Beatrice had scanned her meal thinking that maybe there was a bug in it, or something had spoiled, or . . . Her food looked fine. The dark brown and green colors of her rice and vegetables with the green peas and specks of red and yellow from the pepper sauce made her mouth water a little. She was hungry, and here was this girl telling that her lunch was disgusting. Beatrice wanted cover her lunch container and throw it in the trash. But she loved her food, and maybe if this girl took one bite, she’d love it too.

Beatrice tried to find the right translation for her Haitian leftovers, but she just said, “*Djon-djon* rice and *lalo*.” Within seconds, everyone around made Beatrice feel as if she’d been eating a pile of dog food. Even though it was very delicious, and she’d been eating *djon-djon* and *lalo* since she was a little girl in Haiti.

So Beatrice never pulled out her lunch from home in the cafeteria again. She didn’t even return to the lunch ladies for a regular slice of pizza (too soggy and the cheese tasted like glue) or chicken nuggets (more like styrofoam nuggets). Beatrice sat next to the compost bin where the tables were always empty, and maybe she found comfort being close to

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all the discarded food that would maybe nourish her favorite vegetables in a garden somewhere.

Until the day another girl came to sit at the end of the bench and took out her own plastic bag and lunch container. Beatrice recognized her from her music class, and she didn't want anyone making fun of this girl for not eating cafeteria food or a regular sandwich like everyone else.

"No, no, no!" Beatrice cautioned. "Don't do it! They're going to laugh at you!"

"I don't care," the girl said with a slight accent, shrugging. "I'm hungry."

She carefully uncovered her lunch container and the savory scent reached Beatrice and her belly rumbled. Beatrice patted her own lunch at the bottom of her book bag and looked around at the noisy kids in the cafeteria. No one was paying attention to her, after all. This corner was well-hidden, away from scrunched-up noses and gagging sounds.

"Why aren't you eating?" the girl asked.

Beatrice stretched her neck to take a look at the girl's lunch. It definitely was not a sandwich or a pizza square.

"I'm not hungry," Beatrice lied. "Where are you from?"

"Trinidad," the girl said, smiling and taking another spoonful of her rice. "And you're from Haiti, right?"

Beatrice nodded, cautiously smiling.

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“Haitian food is *good*, boy!” the girl sang with a stronger accent, and motioned for Beatrice to come closer. Her straight, long hair hung past her shoulders and her smooth skin was a much deeper brown than Beatrice’s. “I’m Soraya and you should get away from that stinky trash.”

Beatrice hesitantly scooted closer to the girl, still glancing around to make sure no one would jump out of the shadows to tease Soraya for her lunch. “You know about Haiti?”

“Mmhmm. My downstairs neighbor is from there. I call her granny and she invites me to dinner sometimes.”

Beatrice took another good look at Soraya’s container of a golden mix of chicken, rice, and brown peas.

“What’s . . .” she started but was careful not to be mean like the other kids. “That looks good.”

“Have you had *pelau* before?” Soraya asked.

Beatrice shook her head.

“It’s really good, but I’m so tired of it,” said Soraya. “I had it for dinner last night, and the night before, and the night before that.”

Beatrice glanced down at her phone. Lunchtime was ending soon, and she’d learned enough about Soraya to know that if anyone came over to this table to tease her, she would definitely stick up for herself. And maybe even defend Beatrice, too. Hopefully. So Beatrice quickly pulled out her

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plastic lunch bag and in seconds, the margarine container was in front of her. She stared at it, then looked around, then glanced at Soraya to make sure that it's safe.

“What you having for lunch?” Soraya asked, stirring her food around, not really wanting to take another bite.

Beatrice braced herself and removed the lid from the margarine container to allow the aroma of *diri djon-djon* to fill the air around them.

Soraya's eyes widened and she gasped. “Black mushroom rice!”

Beatrice nodded cautiously and she whispered, “Want some?”

“Only if you take a little bit of this *pelau*.”

Beatrice smiled, then laughed louder than she ever had at Clover Middle School. Still, no one turned to look at her and her new friend. No one came over to stare at their weird lunches. The girls exchanged lunches and together, they were their own rainstorm and earthquake with tears of joy, parting the ground as they stomped their feet under the table, inhaling spoonfuls of spicy, delicious rice in that little smelly corner of the cafeteria.

Until the day two other girls from music class stood a few feet away as Beatrice and Soraya dug into their exchanged

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lunches of Haitian *tom-tom* with okra stew and Trinidadian roti with channa and pumpkin.

One girl stepped closer. “Is that *egusi* soup?” she asked, peering down into Beatrice’s margarine container. Her braids framed her round face perfectly and her African print top was just as bright as her smile.

Beatrice shook her head. “What’s . . .” she started, but she wanted to be careful with her words. “This is *tom-tom* from Haiti. Mashed breadfruit.”

The other girl walked closer to the table. “I know *fufu* when I see it.” Her short afro was pushed back with a piece of fabric that matched her dress.

“But *fufu* is not made from breadfruit,” her friend said, taking a seat next to Soraya.

“You should be eating it with your fingers. Not with a plastic fork,” the other girl said to Beatrice, sliding into the seat next to her.

“Esther and Nneka, right?” Soraya asked the girl. “We all have music class together.”

Esther nodded, tossing her braids back over her shoulder. “Ms. Harris is so nice, but I don’t want to play the flute.”

“I can’t wait until we start the unit on drums,” Beatrice added. “But I don’t like music class because no one knows

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how to play an instrument. It's just noisy like in the halls. What's *fufu* and *egusi*, anyway?"

"Pounded cassava," Esther said. "We call it *fufuo* in Ghana. But Nneka is from Nigeria and she says *fufu*. Same thing, but not like *jollof* rice."

Nneka playfully shoved Esther. "Do not say a word about my *jollof*, which is far more superior."

"You can tell yourself lies all you want," Esther responded, pulling out a pink lunchbox from her book bag. "But everyone knows that Ghana *jollof* is the best!"

"Oh gawsh!" Soraya exclaimed, folding a piece of roti with her fingers. "I've heard about these *jollof* wars. But have you ever tried Trini *pelau*? Now *that* is the best in the world."

"I thought you like black rice more?" Beatrice asked.

"Well, if this is a rice war, then I'm waving my Trini flag in the air!"

Beatrice playfully rolled her eyes at her friend and said, "You always give me your *pelau* and eat my black rice. So you know *djon djon* the best."

The girls went back and forth, sideways and around the world arguing whose rice was the best, ignoring all the usual commotion in the cafeteria until the next day when they each brought a rice dish from home, and sat at the table

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in the smelly corner of the cafeteria to finally put an end to this battle.

Beatrice and Soraya each had a bowl of *jollof* rice, but refused to let Esther and Nneka know which was the best (they wanted to remain friends, after all). Esther and Nneka devoured their containers of black rice and *pelau* without ever claiming which is the best (they didn't want to break-up this sisterhood, neither).

“Can you bring some with chicken tomorrow?” Beatrice asked Nneka, scooping up the last remaining spicy, red rice grains with her plastic spork.

“Only if your grandmother adds some shrimp to the black rice,” Nneka replied, wanting desperately to lick the bowl, but she had manners even if her strict Nigerian mother wasn't around.

While the girls finished each other's lunches, a calm settled in that corner. While chaos was stirring around them in the cafeteria, whatever taunts and insults they had endured in the halls and in their classrooms all disappeared when they leaned over the table resting their chins in their hands with their bellies full. Beatrice and her new friends had traveled to a different country all through a container of flavorful rice. They were content to have made this peaceful

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bubble around themselves, exchanging cultures and food; laughter and language.

Until the day when a noise so loud and a banging so thunderous poured into the cafeteria. Beatrice, Soraya, Esther, and Nneka looked up from their lunches and toward the double doors where a group of girls marched in like soldiers ready for battle.

“Oh no! They’ve come to take our rice!” Nneka joked.

The girls laughed, wanting to return to their lunches, but the cafeteria was suddenly quiet. Something was brewing, but this wasn’t going to be another food fight or an actual fight.

“What are they doing?” Beatrice asked, pointing to the marching girls as they stood in front of the cafeteria in rows and columns. Their legs were spread apart and their fists were at their hips as if waiting for an attack.

Soraya gasped. “It’s The Clover Middle School Step Team!”

“What’s a step team?” Beatrice asked, taking a bite of Esther’s sweet fried plantains.

Before Soraya could respond, someone called out as loud as they possibly could, “READY GIRLS?”

An even louder chorus shouted, “LET’S GET IT!”

Then, a stomping so loud and a clapping so thunderous

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filled the air. Something lit up inside Beatrice and she didn't know whether to cover her ears or stand to her feet so she could see and hear and feel *everything*. If the regular lunchtime chaos was like the end of the world, then this must've been the BIG BANG that created the universe!

STOMP. CLAP. STOMP. CLAP.

STOMP-STOMP-CLAP-CLAP. STOMP. CLAP.

In no time at all, Beatrice, Soraya, Esther, and Nneka were on their feet just like everyone else. Beatrice didn't know when they had gotten within inches of the step team, but there they were, mouths agape, eyes wide, bopping their heads to the beat, and swaying their bodies to the rhythm.

“WE ARE CLOVER!

COMPETITION IS OVER!

SO STEP BACK—

OR WE WILL ATTACK!

WITH A HAND CLAPPIN', FEET STOMPIN'  
RHYTHM AND BEAT—

CLOVER MIDDLE SCHOOL STEP TEAM  
YOU'LL NEVER DEFEAT!”

In the blink of Beatrice's eyes, the girls started moving in all directions—left, right, up, and down, over and under, around the world and back—as they clapped their hands, snapped their fingers, stomped their feet, criss-crossed their

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legs, jumped, kicked, leapt, twirled, did a two-step, bounced their shoulders, sang a whole song, recited poetry, performed a one-act play, threw shade, and spilled tea all unison and with perfect precision.

Beatrice had never seen anything like it. She glanced at her friends who were just as awestruck. As quickly as the step team had marched into the cafeteria, they stomped out as everyone sang, “We are Clover! Competition is over!”

The girls had forgotten all the about their exchanged lunches and their containers of rice had gone cold.

“What was *that*?” Beatrice exclaimed, but instead of wrinkling her nose and fake-gagging, a big smile spread across her face as if the team’s performance was something she wanted to scoop into a bowl to have for lunch.

“That was stepping,” Nneka said. “That’s *their* thing. The American girls make music with their hands and feet.”

“We make music with our hands and feet in Trinidad,” Soraya retorted. “It’s our thing, too.”

“Well, we don’t do it *that* way in Ghana,” Esther said, taking her lunchbox back from Beatrice and packing it away. “And not in Nigeria, neither.”

“But music is music,” Soraya added, taking her container back from Nneka. “Dance is dance. It just looks a little different, that’s all. Like rice and beans.”

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Beatrice kept quiet as worry settled in her belly along with slight hunger pangs. She had not finished her lunch, or rather, Esther’s lunch of Ghanaian red-red—spicy black-eyed peas with sweet plantain. Beatrice didn’t want this step team to come between her and her friends’ lunches.

But Soraya, Esther, and Nneka continued to argue about whether or not stepping was a “their” thing or an “our” thing as they walked out of the cafeteria without planning tomorrow’s lunch exchange like they usually did, until a girl from the step team walked up and handed each of them a flyer without saying a word. Beatrice remembered that girl from her first day of school. She had been one the kids who had teased her about her lunch. A knot formed in her belly when she remembered how mean that girl was, and maybe that step team was made up of a bunch of mean girls too. Her friends stopped in their tracks and read the words together.

*Tryout for the Clover Middle School Step Team*

*Today After School!*

*Come with Sneakers, a Smile, Rhythm, and Beats.*

Soraya squealed with excitement. “Let’s tryout together!”  
“No way!” Nneka said, as she crumpled the flyer, threw

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it into the trash, and started walking down the hall. “But don’t forget my *roti* tomorrow, Soraya!”

“Wait, Nneka!” Esther called out. “I wanna tryout and we always do things together.”

Nneka paused as kids rushed past her, then she turned around and joined Esther. “Okay,” she said. “But we won’t get in. We can’t do what they do.”

“I don’t know about all you, but I have rhythm,” Soraya said, putting her hands on hips to whine her waist.

Nneka and Esther laughed, but Beatrice didn’t. “They weren’t doing that,” she said, folding the flyer and putting it into her pocket. She would throw it away, too, hoping that her friends would do the same. “And I don’t want to tryout. It was just a bunch of noise.”

“You lie!” Soraya said. “I saw how excited you were. You wanted to be up there with them.”

Beatrice pursed her lips, trying to hide the disappointment she was feeling, and said with a low voice, “It was fun to watch. We’re gonna be late for music class.” She rushed down the hall even though it was still her least favorite.

Until she saw the surprise that was waiting for them in Ms. Harris’s music room. The girls walked in late to see a line of different kinds of drums in front of the class, including a whole new drum set with its cymbals, snares,

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and tom-toms—all things they had learned last week when Ms. Harris introduced the percussion unit. Beatrice stopped in front of one that looked familiar. She placed her hand on the top and tapped her finger. The light boom echoed throughout the room and she felt it in her bones. Beatrice didn't want anyone to know that this was something from home, too. She looked up to see her friends touching the other drums.

“Wow! That's a *real* steel pan?” Soraya exclaimed as she touched another kind of percussion instrument. “We're having a carnival?”

“My uncle plays the djembe!” Esther said, as she tapped a drum Beatrice had never seen before.

“We have djembes in Nigeria, too!” Nneka added.

“And how about you?” Ms. Harris asked, startling Beatrice. “Have you seen this one before?”

Beatrice just nodded, not letting her teacher know that her father was a drummer, and she would give anything to hear him play right now. One of the last memories she had in Haiti was when she sat on her father's lap and he taught her how to beat the *tanbou*, as it was called.

Beatrice smiled to herself as she remembered her father playing in a band while everyone danced. But school was

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not a place for such memories. Someone would tease her about it, for sure.

So Beatrice quickly took a seat in the back of the classroom as she usually did when she wanted to avoid the cacophony of string and wind instruments and voices singing off-key. She didn't like the violin nor the flute, and all she wanted to do was cover her ears. Until now, when Ms. Harris introduced all the percussion instruments to the class.

“The drum beat is the sound closest to our hearts,” Ms. Harris said as she stood in front of each drum. “After humans learned to make sound with our bodies—clapping, stomping, and even singing—we used the tools around us to make music. Like the djembe drum over here that is played all throughout West Africa. When Africans were brought to the Caribbean, they made their own kinds of drums. In Trinidad, they used old oil barrels to create the steel pan. When drums were taken away from enslaved Africans in this country, we remembered our bodies again.”

Beatrice sat up in her seat. She didn't know what came over her but she blurted out, “Like stepping!”

“That's right! And stepping is very much like South African gumboot dance,” Ms. Harris added.

The class stirred with commotion as Soraya shouted, “We are Clover! Competition is over!”

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“Settle down now!” Ms. Harris shushed the class, and when they were quiet she asked, “Beatrice, can you share what you know about this drum right here?”

This was why Beatrice didn’t like Ms. Harris. She always kept wanting her to participate, to use her voice—her very own instrument, as she would say.

“*Tanbou*,” Beatrice muttered, not sure if the Creole word translated into English.

“Yes, but we call it the conga,” said Ms. Harris. “Can you teach the class how to say it?”

Beatrice’s face grew hot. It was bad enough that some of the kids made fun of her food, but now she had to teach them Creole?

“Tanbou!” Soraya said, coming to Beatrice’s rescue.

Then Esther and Nneka repeated the Creole word as the class joined in.

“I can play the *tanbou*!” a boy called out and rushed to the drum ahead of Beatrice.

The boy slapped the drum so hard that Beatrice got up from her seat and shoved him away.

“Not like that!” she said. “You have to respect it.” This is what her father had told her when she was little. It was one of the last things he said to her at the airport before boarding a plane to America with her grandmother.

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“Well, why don’t you show us then?” Ms. Harris asked.

Beatrice inhaled, braced herself, sat on a chair, and placed the conga drum between her knees, just like her father taught her. With a BOOM-BIP, BOOM-BOOM-BIP-BAP-BAP, Beatrice played a rhythm that made her all her classmates start to dance. No one made fun of her drumming. No one made fun of something that reminded her of home.

Soraya, Esther, and Nneka beamed with pride, and for Beatrice, this was like a settling storm, clouds parting, and the sun shining down on her, her new friends, and her now favorite class.

Until the end of school when the girls reminded Beatrice of the tryouts.

“I have to help my grandmother with dinner,” Beatrice told them. “Remember, you wanted some shrimp with the *djon-djon*? Don’t we all have to go home to start dinner and pack leftovers for lunch?”

Esther had already started clapping and stomping, but it looked nothing like a step routine.

“If we make the team, we won’t have to eat next to the trash bins anymore,” she said. “We would have popular friends to sit with, and no one would dare say anything to the popular kids.”

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“We won’t get on the step team with you dancing like that,” Nneka said. “You embarrass me, Esther!”

“Well, *I’m* going to make the step team,” said Soraya, waving her hands in the air as if she was in a carnival. “Even if I just whine my waist in the background!”

Beatrice watched her friends dance their way to the cafeteria for the tryouts. “What about lunch?” she shouted, but it was useless because they had already made up their minds. She felt as if the ground beneath her was slowly shifting, but she didn’t want this step team to come between her and her new friends like a crack in the earth.

So Beatrice had no other choice but to return to the cafeteria to watch Soraya, Esther, and Nneka try and fail at getting the step routine right. Soraya kept whining her waist, as she had promised, but that was not stepping. Esther and Nneka were both doing an Afrobeats dance, but that was not stepping, neither.

The captain of the team walked up to the girls, turned up her nose, and said with an attitude, “Y’all look a mess. You can’t step and you won’t make the team.” She was wearing black boots, black leggings, and a t-shirt with ‘Clover’ in white letters. She was also the same girl who had made fun of Beatrice’s lunch.

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Beatrice waited for Soraya to say something mean back to her, but Soraya's face turned sad and her whole body seemed to become small. Neither Esther nor Nneka said anything to the captain of the team, and Beatrice hated to see her friends like this.

So Beatrice inhaled, and with the lingering heat from the spicy peas she had for lunch, she shouted, "Don't talk to them like that!"

The captain jerked back, surprised by the sound of Beatrice's firm voice. "You don't talk to *me* like that! I'm the captain!" the girl said as she turned around and walked away.

Soraya sighed and dropped her shoulders. "Now we're definitely not going to make it!"

The girls eased away from Beatrice as they practiced their routine and tried to get the attention of the captain again. But their beat was wrong and their rhythm was off.

Beatrice walked over to another group of girls who had learned the routine and she listened closely for the rhythm, remembering the BOOM-BIP-BAP of her father's *tanbou*. She watched the girls' hands and feet move about like palms slapping the drumhead, fingers tapping the rim. Drummers always watch the dancers, Beatrice remembered. And dancers always listen to the drummers.

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“I can teach you the routine!” Beatrice said when she returned to her friends. “You have to listen to the rhythm. Watch the beat. And then mix it all together like rice and beans.”

Soraya, Esther, and Nneka tried to mimic her moves, but they were still confused.

So Beatrice said, “Clap like a steel pan, Soraya. Move your hands and feet like you’re whining your waist and waving your flag in the air!”

Then she said to Esther and Nneka, “Stomp like a djembe, and clap like a . . . like . . .”

“Like Kupe dance!” Esther shouted, and clapped out a rhythm as she danced.

“And Shaku!” Nneka said, as she stomped to an Afrobeats rhythm.

Soon, Beatrice and her friends were stepping to the rhythm and beat, while adding their own special, unique flavor.

When it was time for them to showcase their step routine, the girls formed their very own team and got into formation like four points on a square. They stood feet spread apart with their fists on their hips.

“Ready girls!” Beatrice shouted, using her voice as an instrument like Ms. Harris had told her to.

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“Rice and beans, rhythm and beats!” Soraya, Esther, and Nneka shouted back.

With a STOMP, CLAP-CLAP, STOMP-CLAP, Beatrice added her conga spice, Soraya added her steel pan pepper sauce, and Esther and Nneka each added their very own stew of djembe and Afrobreads.

The captain of the step team watched in awe as everyone around cheered them on, trying to copy the girls’ moves. Like their lunches of black rice, *pelau*, and *jollof*, the girls brought each of their cultures into the tryouts and won over not only the team, but the entire school!

“WE ARE CLOVER! COMPETITION IS OVER!” Beatrice and her friends sang as they walked victoriously out of the cafeteria.

“WITH RICE AND BEANS, RHYTHM AND BEATS—

CLOVER MIDDLE SCHOOL STEP TEAM,  
YOU’LL NEVER DEFEAT!”

When the excitement from the successful tryouts settled, the girls finally planned the next day’s lunch. “Rice and beans to celebrate!” Beatrice said as they all walked out of the Clover Middle School building arm in arm like borders between cultures, oceans between nations.

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Until the next day, when the captain of the step team waved them over to sit at their table. Beatrice, Soraya, Esther, and Nneka pulled out their containers of rice to exchange.

But one of their teammates said, “Mmmm. Smells good. What’s that?”

When they girls shared their recipes for each of their lunches, the captain of the step team pulled out a tin container. “My auntie is visiting from New Orleans and she made red beans and rice. I’ll trade you.”

Beatrice smiled, then she laughed louder than the last time she had laughed like this. She was far from the smelly corner in the cafeteria now, sitting in the middle like the eye of the storm. Beatrice and her friends ate as they clapped, savored the flavors as they stomped, and remembered their collective history as they sang. This was not the apocalypse, or a cacophony of noisy sounds anymore, but a harmony of cultures and shared memory.

Beatrice tapped on the lunch table as if it were a conga drum, mimicking her father’s hands. Haiti was far away, but she remembered that home was just like this—food and music connecting her to everything around her, even her own voice. This is what her father used to do when he beat the tanbou. This is what drummers and cooks do

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when they make music for people in the streets, and prepare and pack their favorite meals from home for kids to eat at school in a cafeteria just like this one.

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